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DE RUEHTU #0517/01 2081632  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6607  
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000517

SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (MNARDI, MHAYES)  
DRL (JOHNSTONE/KLARMAN/FOX-OZKAN)  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: THE POLITICS OF SOCCER IN TUNISIA

Classified By: DCM Marc Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) In a country where freedom of expression and association are limited, the stands of a soccer field are one of the few places Tunisians can voice criticism publicly. Tunisians follow the sport obsessively and political careers are born out of club notoriety. In this context, the presidential elections of the Club Africain de Bizerte (one of the premier soccer clubs of northern Tunisia) took an interesting turn. After being accused of mismanagement, the Club's current president said privately he would not run for re-election. A prominent Tunisian-American businessman, then Vice-President of the club, announced he would run for the position only to find out a week later that the current president was going to run anyway and that a local lawyer had also been added to the ballot. As the General Assembly date drew near, it looked like a real election would take place. However, the Governor of Bizerte got involved, ignored the club's bylaws, and appointed a reluctant fourth candidate to the position. Despite some public protest during the General Assembly, the Governor's decision stuck. Such lack of respect for democratic process was a small glimpse into the mentality of the GOT, which is nervous that even a local soccer club election could set a dangerous precedent. End Summary.

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The Politics of the Game  
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¶2. (C) Soccer is more than just a sport in Tunisia. In a society where freedom of expression is tightly controlled, and with a president who has been in power for 22 years (and is poised to "win" the next election in October 2009), soccer is a proxy for democracy. In the world of soccer, the media is free to criticize club presidents, the public is free to comment on the quality of management, and sporting events serve as a safety valve for youth to blow off steam. The soccer-politics link in Tunisia is historically strong: many presidents of soccer federations and clubs have gone on to become powerful political figures. The list includes big names like current Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, Health Minister Mondher Zenaïdi, or Tunisia's Industrial and Commercial Association (UTICA) President Hedi Jilani. Soccer is a way for leadership to gain the grassroots support necessary for eventual political prominence.

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Change in the Air in Bizerte  
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¶3. (C) When the Club Africain de Bizerte (CAB), the premier

club in northern Tunisia, was set to elect a new president, the media and public were at attention. Ahmed Karoui, the Club's president for the last four years, had been publicly blamed for the Club's financial woes and general administrative mismanagement. The July 2009 CAB elections promised actual change, as Karoui had mentioned privately to club members he would step down. Ali Belakhoua (protect), a dual American and Tunisian citizen who owns an electoral components factory in Bizerte and is a well-known contact of the Embassy's Commercial Section, put his hat in the ring for Karoui's seat. A prominent businessman and then current Vice-President of the club, Belakhoua was popular among club members and the general public. Belakhoua is a card-carrying RCD member and comes from a self-described prominent family. He lived and studied in the United States for many years, and sought to run for Congress in St. Louis, Missouri.

14. (C) After Karoui said he would step down, Belakhoua formally presented his candidacy, only to hear a week later that Karoui was going to run after all. According to Belakhoua, this created havoc as it would be the first time an actual election for Club President would take place, versus a back-room negotiation resulting in a sole candidate "running" for the position. A week later, a third candidate appeared, a prominent lawyer from Bizerte (Belakhoua did not disclose his name). Soon the governor of Bizerte, Salem Jribi, got involved, trying to mediate between the candidates and ordering the General Assembly to be postponed twice in the hopes of avoiding an actual electoral process.

15. (C) The CAB is supported by public money. According to a press article, the club receives 30,000 TND (US\$21,500) in presidential subsidies, 200,000 TND (US\$142,800) from the National Fund for Sports Promotion, and 30,000 TND (US\$21,500) from the Municipality of Bizerte. This is in addition to the money received from player trades. Under Karoui's management, the club racked up a 22,335 TND (US\$15,950) deficit for the 2008-2009 season. Press cited poor choices in player drafts and hired coaches as the main problems. According to Belakhoua, it is precisely because the club receives public money that the Governor of Bizerte was allowed to get involved.

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Drama at the Club's General Assembly  
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16. (C) Unable to convince candidates to step down, Governor Jribi made a surprise announcement at the CAB Elective General Assembly on July 21: the appointment of a fourth candidate, Said Lassoud, as the new President. Lassoud is a well-known local politician and parliamentarian who was involved in the club's leadership two decades ago. Jribi made the appointment despite the club's bylaws, which outline an electoral process. According to Belakhoua and the press, there were loud protests at the assembly, with participants calling for more transparency in the designation of president. An opposition newspaper criticized the governor for his interference, noting that "we might as well ask the governor to be the coach." Belakhoua said the Governor informed him privately of the decision only hours before, and said Jribi had been forced by "higher-ups" to make that decision. (Note: according to our records, Belakhoua is a personal friend of the Governor.) Belakhoua also told CommercialOff that Lassoud did not really want the appointment because he is too busy to dedicate adequate time to the Club, but felt pressured to accept it.

17. (C) Although the press made no mention of who the protesters at the Assembly were, Belakhoua said they had been "loyal opposition" members who had somehow entered the Assembly with other people's membership cards. Belakhoua received text messages and calls throughout the next day, as part of the "investigation" of who let the protesters in. (Note: Belakhoua did not admit any involvement in allowing them entry.)

18. (C) Belakhoua was visibly shaken up by the turn of

events, and confided to Emboffs that he was afraid there may be repercussions against him in the form of undue scrutiny of his business. He said he had turned down an offer by Lassoud to be on the next board, and would just lay low. Belakhoua was saddened by the lack of democratic process, which he likely would have won (a recent Facebook poll, he noted, had him winning 80-90 percent of the vote.) He said maybe he "came from a different mentality" (referencing his time in the US), and that in Tunisia, people just accepted these things.

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Comment  
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19. (C) The story of the Club Africain de Bizerte's presidential election is a fascinating metaphor for the state of Tunisian democracy. Despite bylaws to the contrary, the majority of members were reticent to question the governor's authority and accepted the appointment of a person who had not shown any prior interest in the position. Those who did voice discontent were regarded with suspicion and "investigated" by the club's leadership. Since the club is funded by the government, its members accepted lack of transparency and back-room dealings to choose the new leadership. Ali Belakhoua, who perhaps had some political ambitions of his own, was left saddened and dejected, saying that "all he wanted was to be president of his Club." It remains to be seen if there are indeed any repercussions for him out of this whole process. In the lead up to Tunisia's October 2009 presidential elections, it is obvious the regime is nervous about any real examples of democracy taking place.

End Comment.  
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